

Croker Prize for Biography

Entry 1509

Broken Promises

BROKEN PROMISES

James Boxshall was born on 29 June 1807 at Dorking, Surrey, England, the son of a farmer, William Boxshall and his wife Elizabeth Knight¹. He became an agricultural labourer, managing the Whitmuir Farm which was owned by Henry Dendy, the man who was to shape James' future. After marrying Jane Razzell on 13 April 1828², James and his bride lived in Back Lane, Dorking, and six children were born to them. Their third child, Anne, was seven years old when she died of typhoid fever.

To give insight into the reason that James and his family emigrated, it is necessary to understand the decision taken by Henry Dendy, James' boss. Dendy had become interested in the colonies when an offer was made by Her Majesty's Government for the purchase of eight square miles of land in the Port Phillip district of the then Territory of New South Wales (now known as Victoria) which had been made available as a system of 'selection of sections of 320 acres at a flat rate of £1 per acre'. Dendy put up his £5,120 by selling his farms and using his wife's dowry, and arrived in the colony on 5 February 1841 with his wife, young son and three servants. The land regulations under which Dendy acquired his Land Order allowed for every purchaser, within six months to name a number of persons of the labouring class for a free passage to the Colony, in proportions to the amount of the purchase money which had been paid. The emigrants must belong to the class of mechanics and handcraftsmen, agricultural labourers, or useful domestic servants. All the adults had to be capable of labour and emigrate with the intention of working for wages after their arrival³.

A year after young Anne's death, and at the age of 34, James, together with Jane and their young family, left England on 12 February 1842 on the *Earl of Durham*. Jane was about five months pregnant at the time. They arrived at Port Phillip on 18 June 1842 after a voyage of 126 days⁴. The ship finally entered Hobsons Bay off Williamstown, where the passengers and cargo were discharged. Jane gave birth to their seventh child, John, en route, about three weeks before their arrival in Australia. Accompanying them on the voyage was James' brother William, with his wife (also named Jane) and their young family. They were part of the group of emigrants from Surrey and Sussex given free passage to Australia in return for their farming skills, to work at Dendy's property. The eight square miles of undulating property, comprising open forest land timbered with gum, oak, cherry and honeysuckle, with a bay frontage, was situated five miles from Melbourne and was firstly named 'Waterville', then 'Dendy's Brighton Estate', and finally 'Brighton', the name still retained today although the boundaries have changed considerably. However, Dendy had arrived in the colony in the midst of a serious financial depression and by the time the emigrants' ship had arrived in Port Phillip Bay, Dendy had abandoned all ideas of an agricultural estate, he was no longer the sole owner of the Brighton Estate having been forced to sell a good portion of the land to Were Bros. & Co., and he was fast running out of ready money. His plans of an agricultural estate had been turned into plans for a township surrounded by farming allotments⁵. We can only imagine the emigrants' feelings of excitement and anticipation turning to shock and despair upon arrival, as they were greeted on board by Dendy and told that there was no employment after all.

With their plans in disarray, James and many of the Dendy emigrants made their way to Brighton anyway, some in bullock carts and many walking the miles along roughly formed tracks. Once there, with five children and a new-born baby to support, James constructed a

mud hut and a bed of saplings on land now at the corner of Bay Street and St Kilda Street. He and Jane and their children remained there for nine months. With no furniture, James set about making a stool for his wife and whilst he was cutting the slab for the top, he sent his eldest son Thomas, then aged 13, to find material suitable for the legs. Thomas cut the sticks for the legs from green wattle, then James trimmed the top and set the legs in position. The little stool shows marks of where kindling was split on it for the fire. Jane had a travelling artist paint a portrait of her sitting on the stool and she sent the portrait back home to her parents in Dorking. Thomas was very attached to the stool, having had a hand in its construction, and passed it on to his son Henry John Boxshall. In 1965 Henry donated it to the Brighton Historical Society, situated so close to where it was first constructed. It is now one of the Society's most treasured possessions and regarded as a most valuable antique⁶.



Pioneer peg stool that James made for his wife Jane is now housed at the Brighton Historical Society headquarters in the Old Brighton Town Hall

A strong bond of friendship was formed between the 'Dendy' emigrants and streets in Brighton were named after four of them – one being Boxshall Street. Early in 1843, James purchased from Henry Dendy two acres of land at the corner of St. Andrews Street and Boxshall Street, and built a slab hut. He paid twenty pounds an acre for the land and subsequently purchased the adjoining acre from Mr Were for ten pounds. The slab hut was removed in 1900. Within a few years of their arrival, Brighton had become one of the most important villages around Melbourne. Henry Dendy, however, had no head for business and lost his home and land in Brighton, attempted other business ventures without success, and finally died a pauper at Walhalla in Gippsland in 1881, where he was searching for gold. By poor management he had lost his entire fortune⁷.

Jane gave birth to three more children in Brighton but James lost his wife to cancer when she was only 56⁸. Almost a year later, James married a farmer's daughter, Rachel Tattersall⁹, who was born in Rochdale, Lancashire, England in 1818, and was 11 years younger than James. However, he and Rachel parted company after a very short time and there is no further trace of her in the Victorian records.

Although he could not read or write, James was an extremely industrious person, working very hard to improve conditions for his wife and family. He had a good business head, and later bought five acres of land from Mr John Shatton and obtained 81 bushels of wheat from three acres. He gave one acre each to two sons, and exchanged the remainder to another son for twelve acres at South Brighton. He afterwards re-purchased the latter son's block for two hundred pounds and sold it again for eight hundred and fifty pounds¹⁰.

After leaving the farm, calling upon his experience as a teamster back in Surrey, James drove a bullock team, conveying goods along the old tracks between Brighton and Melbourne¹¹.

In his old age James became very bent, owing to curvature of the spine, and used to walk with two sticks, but he was very active. His grandson Henry John wrote '*As I was watching him weed (a bed of carrots), he looked up at me with a grin and said, "You know Harry, it doesn't bother me a bit having a curved spine, I can weed carrots all day and never get a backache".*' He was a fine old man, he liked his pot of beer at the 'Town Hall Hotel' where he used to visit two or three days a week, but he never over indulged. They were reared on home brew back in Surrey, where one branch of the family were involved with the Boxall Brewery in Mills Lane, Dorking, and they hardly knew what tea was until they came to the colonies¹².

James spent his last years working as a gardener and lived at the home of his youngest son Charles in William Street, Brighton. One day in early November 1903, James took it upon himself to chop some wood out the back of the house. The axe glanced off the block of wood and struck him across the foot, cutting through his shoe and his big toe on his right foot. No treatment was able to save the wound from becoming infected. It turned gangrenous and James passed away two months later. At the time of his death on 7 January 1904 at the age of 96¹³, James was the oldest resident in Brighton¹⁴ and had lived there for almost 62 years. Of his ten children, only three were still alive – Thomas aged 74, John aged 62 and Charles aged 54.

NOTES:

1. Family Search IGI
2. Parish Register St. Martins, Dorking, England 1828 No. 240
3. Beryl Nice, late of Rosebud, Victoria, descendant of James and Jane Boxshall
4. Persons on bounty ships arriving at Port Phillip 1840-3, original located at 4/4818
5. Kingston Historical Society
6. Brighton Historical Society
7. 'Henry Dendy and his Emigrants' by Leslie A. Schumer 1975
8. Registry of Births, Deaths and Marriages, Melbourne – District of Brighton No. 1031
9. Registry of Births, Deaths and Marriages, Melbourne – District of Bourke No. 1940
10. 'The Argus', Melbourne, 9 January 1904
11. 'The Argus', Melbourne, 9 January 1904
12. Beryl Nice, late of Rosebud, Victoria, descendant of James and Jane Boxshall
13. Registry of Births, Deaths and Marriages, Melbourne – District of Brighton No. 4161
14. 'The Argus', Melbourne, 9 January 1904